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ABSTRACT

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HOW NOT TO EMBARK ON A BILINGUAL EDUCATION POLICY IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: THE CASE OF NIGERIA

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HOW NOT TO EMBARK ON A BILINGUAL EDUCATION POLICY IN A DEVELOPING NATION: THE CASE OF NIGERIA.

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Introduction

There is probably no country today which does not have some kind of language planning or some organized effort aimed at either preventing or solving already existing language related social problems. It is probably axiomatic also that language conflicts would always arise whenever people from different language backgrounds come into contact. Not only do the abstract linguistic systems in contact create conflicts but also the attitudes and perceptions of their speakers often differ considerably too. Consequently, language contact may generate purely linguistic conflicts leading to what Weinreich (1953) describes as interference, or it may create purely social conflict involving the ideological, social, political and economic values which different speakers attach to their languages (Haarmann 1990). Of these two types of conflict, the latter is probably better known and is not a concern of linguists alone, but also of scholars in other disciplines such as Sociology, History and Politics. Language planning activities in different countries of the world often require the involvement of formal education, partly as a focus of language planning itself and partly as a vehicle for the implementation of the plans.

In this paper, I shall examine language and language education policies in Nigeria, with a view to identifying some of the problems that face the implementation of these policies in the country, and, by extension, in other countries of Africa and Asia, whose ethno-linguistic backgrounds may be similar to that of Nigeria. It should be made clear from the outset that the term bilingual shall be used in this paper in the way both Mackey (1957:51) and Weinreich (ibid:5) have used it, namely, as a simple way of referring to the existence in a society of two or more languages. But in addition, I shall also use it in the sense Aucamp (1926) (in Beziers and Van Overbeke (1968:113) uses it to imply the presence in one single speaker of two or more languages. Thus my use of the term here may imply any or all of what is sometimes referred to in the literature as bilingualism, multilingualism, or plurilingualism, be it in a social context or in the individual language speaker (i.e societal bilingualism and individual bilingualism) (Baetens-Beardsmore 1982). The adoption of a single term here is to avoid any possible confusion in nomenclature, since what is often referred to as bilingualism often implies multilingualism too.

The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria

To further set the ground for this paper, it is relevant to examine very briefly the background to the present linguistic situation and the language policy of Nigeria. As in many other bilingual African and Asian nations today, the existence of a bilingual and bi-cultural society called Nigeria is one of the

legacies of colonialism. Thus although small-scale ethno-linguistic pluralism might have been entrenched in some of the pre-colonial kingdoms, empires and emirates, none of these small states could have hoped to develop into a complex geopolitical entity of the size of the present-day Nigeria. The scramble for and partitioning of Africa, and particularly the amalgamation in 1914 of the Lagos, and Southern colonies with the Northern protectorate to form the present-day Nigeria, therefore, brought together for the first time several ethnic groups and languages (some of which have their own numerous dialects). Today, with an estimated total of about 400 languages, Nigeria is, no doubt, one of the most linguistically complex nations in Africa.

During the struggle for independence, and especially in the campaign for the first general election in 1960, controversy raged over which one of the major languages should be designated the national language of Nigeria. But probably because of the politically sensitive nature of the problem, and in order not to play into the hands of the colonial masters, the different political parties seemed to have reached a tacit agreement to shelve the matter. It was not until 1977 that the first deliberate attempt was made to address the language problem in the country, through the formulation of the "Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education". Although the policy focuses on education in general, and reference is made to language only in a few lines, it is the first, (and still the only official) document, which has attempted to deliberately assign roles to lan-

guages in the education system. By 1979, when a new Constitution was being adopted for the nation, further attempts were made to delineate the specific functions and status of languages in national/ official matters in the country, particularly in the legislative assemblies. A brief quotation of the relevant parts of both the 1977 National Policy on Education (henceforth the NPE) and the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (henceforth the Constitution) is in order here.

Section 1 paragraph 8 of the NPE states as follows:

> "In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba."

Section 3:15 (4) of the document states further:

> "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, and at a later stage, English".

For its part, the Constitution states in paragraph 51 as follows:

> "The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English language, and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof."

Paragraph 91 of the Constitution adds that:

> The business of a House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more other

languages spoken in the State as the House may by resolution adopt.[1]

In a nutshell, the provisions in both the NPE and the Constitution seem to be deliberate attempts to ensure that the unique position occupied by the English language in the affairs of the country is shared with some of the indigenous languages. More importantly, the language policy represented by these provisions aims at accommodating at least three main interests. First is the interest of mother tongue and culture, through the use of the language of the child's immediate community at the initial stage of primary education. Second is to ensure national unity or at least prevent national disintegration which could arise as a result of linguistic differences. Third, the policy aims at tapping into the modern world of science and technology, through the retention of English for formal education beyond the initial stage of the primary level. Obviously, taken at their face values, these objectives look attractive and they are desirable for building of a modern society that is not culturally anemic. But how successful is the language policy? Perhaps, it is only now, almost one and a half decades since the NPE was formulated, that one can begin to assess its impact on the linguistic situation of the country.

The State of the Art

Although the 1977 NPE and the 1979 Constitution both contain provisions aimed at defining and fine tuning the status and roles of languages in political, educational, and consequently, social

matters in Nigerians, virtually nothing has changed as far as the roles and status of languages in Nigeria is concerned, despite the provisions of the two documents quoted above. Adopting the framework used by Tay (1979), the following brief discussion of the present roles and status of languages in Nigeria will make the point clearer.

First, although Nigeria has no publicly declared language for the expression of national identity, English is, for all practical purposes, the national language of the country. English is also the official language, even though the language policy represented by the relevant parts of both the NPE and the Constitution implicitly suggests that this role should be shared with the three major indigenous Nigerian languages, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Thus English is the de facto, if not the de jure, official language of Nigeria. It is the language of administration, particularly at the Federal and States levels, and only at the local government level is this function shared with some of the dominant indigenous languages. Even so, English is the preferred language except where the intended goal will not be adequately served by that language, and particularly when the objective is to reach out to the largely illiterate population. In addition, English is the only language of justice except, again, at the local government level where the local indigenous languages are also used along with English.

English is the main working language in both public and private

sectors in Nigeria, except for small family businesses. It is also the language of formal education. Although the NPE stipulates the use of the language of the immediate community in the early stage of primary education, it is common knowledge that, in general, only English is used right from the primary level through to the tertiary. It has been noted that teachers, especially those in the primary school, tend to revert to indigenous languages in attempts to clarify points to their pupils in the course of teaching (Afolayan 1979). While this observation is generally true, care should be taken not to interpret this as implementation of the provision of the NPE. Such teachers most probably resort to indigenous languages only to compensate for their own incompetence in the English language.

In addition to its dominant role in administration, justice, commerce, and the public service, English is also the language of inter-ethnic communication in Nigeria. Being the only language spoken across the length and breadth of the country, English is the natural language any two Nigerians meeting for the first time would employ for the exchange of greetings.[2]

The various indigenous languages are used mainly for intra-ethnic communication, religion, and as home languages. In essence, the indigenous Nigerian languages still remain in their traditional positions and they perform virtually the same roles as ever before, despite the language policy which was ostensibly formulated to change the situation. Worse still, with formal education

reaching more and more people, the roles of the indigenous languages in religion and in the home is fast diminishing. It should not be surprising therefore to find many homes, particularly in the urban centers, where the children do not speak nor understand the languages of their parents. Nor should one be amazed to run into religious functions in which English is the language spoken all through.

It follows from the above that the position and roles of different languages in Nigeria can hardly be said to have been changed by the language policy provisions contained in both the NPE and the Constitution. As a matter of fact, it was not until January 1991 that any concrete step was taken towards the implementation of the provisions of the NPE in respect of the teaching and learning of the three major indigenous Nigerian languages in primary schools. Even so, the attempt is already proving to be an experiment which has had more than its normal share of difficulties. Given the present situation, one must be a stubborn optimist to believe that the experiment can succeed.

Similarly, with regard to the adoption of indigenous languages in the legislative assemblies, it is a well known fact that this too was not successfully implemented during the short-lived civilian administration of 1989 to 1983. Adegbija (1989), Akinnaso (1989) and Bamgbose (1991) have suggested some insightful reasons for the failure of the language policy in this connection. In sum, it is no exaggeration to say that the Nigerian attempt to formu-

late and implement a coherent bilingual education policy has so far been an exercise in futility. Why then has this been so? Answers to this question constitute the main thrust of this paper. It should be stressed at this point that, in line with the title of this paper, the rest of the paper will focus only on the language policy in relation to education. In other words, aspects of the language policy relating to the failure to adopt it during the life of the defunct National Assembly will not be discussed here.

Bilingual Education Policy: What went Wrong

Aspects of bilingualism which must be considered as contributory to the success of any bilingual education policy include its sociology, psychology, linguistics and pedagogy. For any bilingual education program to be successfully implemented, therefore, all of these factors must favor the existence of such a program in the first place.

A careful examination of the ways and manners in which the Nigerian bilingual education program was embarked upon clearly reveals that none of these vital factors was in its favor. The bilingual education policy is characterized by a lack of sensitivity to its environment, built-in loopholes, lack of precision, and a seeming lack of foresight, all of which combine to ensure the failure of the policy, even before it could be implemented.

First, the loopholes and imprecision. Section 1 paragraph 8 of

the NPE states inter alia: "each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue" (bold print mine for emphasis). The phrase "should be encouraged" can be interpreted to mean that it is desirable, but not compulsory, for every child to learn one of the major languages other than his own mother tongue; and it is not difficult to imagine that this is the interpretation the average person would like to give it for obvious reasons. After all, any learning is a task, and nobody would like to engage in a task, unless there is an obvious reason for doing so . In this particular situation, what makes such an interpretation more attractive is the fact that the policy statement does not contain any incentive to entice the would be learner, nor is any penalty entrenched within it to deter any violation. Whether such a loose interpretation is what the originators of the policy intended or not is a matter for debate. But one thing is clear: a policy meant to be taken seriously by the people cannot afford to be couched in such a language that makes it so easy for the intended populace to maneuver.

A second loose end in the policy is contained in the same section 1 paragraph 8: "Government considers it in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages". The policy statement does not continue to make pronouncements on <u>who</u> is to do the job of encouraging the child, <u>when</u>, <u>where</u>, and <u>how</u> it is to be done. It is interesting also to note that while the policy states that each

child should be encouraged to learn one of the major languages, no one is sure whether this should also commence at the initial stage of primary education, and if so, whether it should continue at the second stage, or even beyond it.

Another flaw which may have contributed to the failure of the bilingual education policy is contained in Section 3.15 paragraph 4 of the NPE. This section states that: "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, and, at a later stage, English" (bold print mine for emphasis). What the phrases "initially" and "at a later stage" mean are, again, open to different interpretations. Whether the initial stage corresponds to the first three years of the six years of primary education while the later stage represents the last three years is uncertain. Suffice to say, however, that the point at which the mother tongue should cease, and where English would be expected to take over as the language of education, could have been more clearly stated, if accuracy and precision were intended.

Apart from loose ends and lack of precision, the Nigerian bilingual policy does not seem to be sensitive to its geopolitical environment. First, the view that it is in the interest of national unity for each child to learn one major language in addition to his own mother tongue presupposes and capitalizes on the view that language is a major factor in national unity in

Nigeria. While this may be generally true, it should be emphasized that the extent to which language is important for national unity in the country may have been exaggerated. As a matter of fact, it would seem that, in the Nigerian situation, language would enhance national unity only if no one indigenous language is allowed to dominate the political and social affairs of the country at the expense of other indigenous languages. While not dismissing the importance of language in national unity, therefore, one should emphasize that other matters seem potentially more dangerous than language to the unity of the country. Important matters such as the equitable distribution of the nation's wealth, the quota system which appoints officers to sensitive and important positions in the national civil service on the strength of their ethnic backgrounds rather than on the basis of qualifications and merit, religious intolerance, and unemployment, to name a few, probably constitute a greater threat to national unity in the country. Fishman's (1969:44-45) observation is relevant here:

> "Divisiveness is an ideologized position and it can magnify differences: indeed it can manufacture differences in language as in other matters almost as easily as it can capitalize on more obvious differences. Similarly, unification is an ideologized position and it can minimize seemingly major differences or ignore them entirely, whether these be in the realm of language, religion, culture, race, or any other basis of differentiation. Conscious and even ideologized language differences need not be divisive, whether at the national or the international level."

The assumption that knowledge of the language of another ethnic

group will enhance national unity seems to have been proved wrong in the Nigerian situation by some recent events in the country. For example, the thousands of souls lost in the various religious riots which engulfed the northern part of the country between 1983 and 1991 were mainly those of people who had lived in that part of the country for some time and who had acquired the local languages of their assailants. Obviously, reasons other than language must be sought in such a crisis.

Another lack of sensitivity inherent in the Nigerian bilingual education policy is in connection with its psychology. The policy seems to ignore the feelings and attitudes of the minority language speakers who constitute about forty percent of the population. The demand that every child should learn one of the major indigenous languages in addition to his own mother tongue means that children from minority language groups will have to learn at least three languages, their own mother tongues, English, and any one of the major languages. But it also means that such children are being asked to embrace other people's languages and cultures while no one is interested in learning their own languages and cultures in return (see also Fakuade 1989). Such a demand seems like an open invitation to minority language speakers to dispose of their own identities in exchange for those of rival ethnic groups. This is more so because the same policy does not seem to recognize the usefulness of the minority languages beyond the initial stage of primary education. Worse still, nothing concrete is as yet available to suggest that the

government is committed to the development of these minority languages. It is clear therefore that speakers of minority languages could not have wished the bilingual policy a smooth sail.

In addition to the possibility of generating ill-feelings among the minority language speakers, the bilingual policy also fails to indicate how it would ensure that speakers of the three major languages faithfully learn one another's language. For it is naive to assume that, in a country where ethno-linguistic division permeates every sphere of life, merely encouraging the child to learn the language of a rival ethnic group is sufficient to remove the mutual distrust that has always been part of the national polity. For instance, would the Igbos and Yorubas like to embrace Hausa, even when they are not sure that Hausas will equally learn Igbo and Yoruba in return? Would any of the three major ethnic/linguistic groups like to learn the language of another rival group (at the expense of his own ethnic language) and risk the possibility of that rival language suddenly becoming the indisputable national/official language of the country by virtue of the number of its speakers? Unless certain obvious and impartial provisions are inserted in the bilingual policy to guarantee that there would be no cheating in the matter, then one should expect a general state of mutual ethno-linguistic suspicion among the major language groups. Perhaps, a little foresight on the part of the policy formulators would have ensured the insertion in the bilingual education policy of a clause which

would guarantee fair play and remove such mutual suspicion.

As for linguistic factor, the Nigerian bilingual education policy was put in place at a time when the majority of the languages in the country were (and still are) not reduced into writing. Yet, most, if not all, of these languages are expected to be used as the medium if instruction at the initial stage of primary education. The magnitude of the problem is revealed by the fact that, even now, Igbo, one of the three major languages, does not have a widely accepted standard orthography. As Fakuade (ibid) points out, Igbo scholars are still locked in controversy over which of Onicha and Oweri dialects should be regarded as standard Igbo.

The present economic situation of Nigeria can hardly be worse for the imple meaningful large scale bilingual education as has been proposed. The impov has meant difficulties in maintaining existing educational infrastructure more to the problems might result in a total collapse of the system. It is n fore, that, up to the present moment, no special attempt has been made to tr teachers in any of the three major languages, who would serve as models and of raw linguistic data for children learning each of the languages in schoo its domain. For unless the education system intends to indulge in the false speaker of a language can teach it, then large scale production of teachers in the three languages is unavoidable.

In addition to teachers, textbooks and suitable teaching materials are pedagogical matters which should have been attended to before the bilingual education program was embarked upon. These

ought to have been produced in large quantity for each of the three major languages, and the minor ones which are expected to be adopted for instruction at the lower primary level. Apart from lack of resources for such a giant step, the fact noted above, that most of the languages are yet to be written, will obviously render any attempt to embark upon textbook production meaningless, unless these languages are first developed and standardized.

Finally, since any bilingual education program can only be implemented successfully through formal education, it would be expected that the policy establishing such a bilingual program should also contain some enabling power that will make the education system a servant to the policy. As it were, the Federal government does not have any direct control over the primary and secondary levels of education, even though these are the two levels where the bilingual education program is expected to be implemented. In addition to numerous schools in the hands of private operators, public primary and secondary schools are in the hands of local and state governments respectively. Decisions on primary and secondary school curricula are also taken at the state and local government levels. Without a central control of the education system, it is difficult to imagine how the system can be utilized to adequately implement the central bilingual program.

Conclusion

The relevant questions one should begin to ask must include the following. Was the bilingual education program deliberately put in place merely to pacify agitators for a national language policy, or was there a lack of foresight on the part of the policy makers? Whatever answers one may obtain, it is clear that any successful implementation of the bilingual policy as now formulated will be difficult, if not impossible; and unless care is taken, the policy may end up creating more problems than it sets out to solve, or even damage the very interests it was meant to protect. Perhaps, it is in recognition of this potential danger that the government itself seems unenthusiastic about the implementation of the bilingual policy.

Given the problems identified above which make the implementation of the existing bilingual education policy almost impossible, one genuinely wonders whether there is any solution other than the present pacifist approach and apparent avoidance strategy. To my mind, there is an answer, although it may not be an easy one. But first, we must remind ourselves that, at stake in the decision to formulate language policies in many, if not all, new nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are at least two main issues. First, there was the need to assert and maintain national identity, particularly immediately after political independence. Naturally, language is an easy target because it is one of the significant legacies of colonialism . Thus patriotism and nationalism often find expression in the call for lin-

guistic independence, not only as a feature of political independence, but also as a marker of national self-esteem (Adegbija 1989). The second issue is the need to keep in touch with scientific and technological innovations and to be a member of the international community to which all nations belong.

Given the fact that the language of the former colonial master is, more often than not, also the language of modern science and technology, and the language of the international community, it would seem that these two goals are incompatible. But they are. The solution lies in the willingness of the nation concerned to be realistic and pragmatic in its approach to language planning and language politics. Such an approach will, among other things, have to realize and accept the inevitability and importance of the English as a language of the international community which needs to be developed for its utilitarian values. It should also be recognized and accepted as a proper agent of multicultural and multilingual development in bilingual/bi-cultural settings (Afolayan 1979). It is this line of reasoning which I have advanced elsewhere (Oladejo 1991), by suggesting in the particular case of Nigeria, that a trilingual rather than bilingual education policy is needed. Such a policy will have to recognize the importance and usefulness of the Nigerian Pidgin English as a potential national language, and at the same time focus on the teaching and learning of the child's mother tongue and the retention of English for the purpose of higher education and for international politics and diplomacy. If properly

planned and well executed, such a policy, I believe, will adequately take care of the concern for national identity, and of the need to keep abreast developments in the ever-developing world of modern science and technology. Yet, such a policy would also not be subject to the kind of problems earlier identified which have so far crippled the existing bilingual education policy in the country.

Although the foregoing observations about bilingual education in Nigeria are meant to focus attention on the language education policy of the country as a typical example of how not to embark upon a bilingual education program in a multilingual, multicultural, developing nation, this is by no means to say that the Nigerian situation is unique. For as Bamgbose (ibid) rightly points out, language policies in Africa are generally characterized by avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuations and declarations without implementation. In most of these cases also, the goals of bilingual education policies are not carefully established, nor are the means meticulously selected, with possible outcomes predicted in any systematic manner (Rubin 1971).

It is appropriate to conclude this paper with a word of advice on the Brunei bilingual education policy. There are at least three lessons which Brunei can learn from the Nigerian experience. First, while there is hardly any doubt about the usefulness and

practicality of the national ideology of "Melayu, Islam, Beraja" (Malay, Islam, Monarchy) (for further discussion of this policy, see Jones, In Baldauf and Luke (1990: 298-299), in which the Malay language is the national language and a compulsory subject for every school child, it should be recalled that one of the major problems identified in this paper with regard to the Nigerian situation is its lack of sensitivity to the feelings of speakers of minority languages. In this connection, Brunei's language policy stands a better chance of success, if the minor languages are not totally ignored. Corpus planning aimed at promoting and developing such minor languages as Chinese, Iban, Dusun and Totong will be essential in order to generate positive attitudes from the speakers of these languages towards the overall national language policy.

The second important lesson from the Nigerian experience is in respect of adequate provision for teacher training and development. In any bilingual education policy the role of the teacher is comparable to that of the nurse or midwife in the delivery and care of a new born baby. Any act of commission or omission on the part of the nurse/midwife can be fatal to the child. In the same way, to ensure that a bilingual education policy succeeds, necessary training and adequate incentives must be given to language teachers, without which the policy may fail.

Finally, the development of textbooks and teaching materials should be a priority on the agenda of the government bodies

responsible for the implementation of the policy. For as we have seen in the case of Nigeria, lack of textbooks and inadequate teaching materials could combine with other factors to render the bilingual policy inoperable.

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(1)Although a new Constitution to be fully adopted in 1992 has been worked out, it is pertinent to mention that aspect s of the 1979 Constitution relevant to the roles and status of languages in National and State Assemblies are not modified in the new Constitution.

(2) The claim here is not that English is spoken by many more people than the population of the speakers of any one of the major indigenous languages, but that it is more widespread (geographically) than any of these. Indeed, since English is learnt primarily through formal education, it is difficult to suggest that it has more speakers than the major indigenous languages in a largely illiterate society as Nigeria.